

Mermaids Embodies the Rotting Carcass of Science TV

  

or other places

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Late last night, my friend and fellow blogger [Miriam Galkstein](#) sent me an e-mail with the title “please oh please debunk this.” I have to admit that I wasn’t exactly in the debunking mood at the time, but I couldn’t resist having a look – what rotting bit of pseudoscientific nonsense had washed ashore now?

Miriam’s e-mail led me to the promotional page for [Mermaids: The Body Found](#). Part of Animal Planet’s inaugural Monster Week, the promo release announced, the documentary-format special “paints a wildly convincing picture of the existence of mermaids.” An editor’s note at the top stated that the show “is science fiction based on some real events and scientific theory,” but the rest of the release was written as if all the imaginary evidence for [fish-bodied humanoid](#) were authentic.

This wasn’t the first time Animal Planet presented fantasy as reality. In 2004, the Discovery spin-off network aired [Dragons: A Fantasy Made Real](#) — an hour-and-a-half special about the evolution and biology of fire-breathing dragons. The speculative show hinged on the fabricated discovery of a dragon in the Carpathian Mountains, and, in a similar fashion, *Mermaids* rolled on imaginary forensic evidence (see the video above) and audio recordings to play out its story.

Dragons and mermaids feel out of place on what ostensibly seems to be a science channel, but I can’t begrudge Animal Planet trying a bit of fantasy as long as it is advertised as such. But, as I settled in with a hard drink to watch the show, two things unsettled me about *Mermaids*. The reason I decided to sacrifice an hour and a half of my life to the odious fiction of *Mermaids* is that the show claimed to be partially based on the Aquatic Ape Hypothesis. (Some people say “Aquatic Ape Theory,” and this makes me want to [punch them in the jeans](#). The AAH is nonsense dressed up as science, and nowhere close to being [a scientific theory](#).) From the press release:

Mermaids: The Body Found is a story about evolutionary possibility grounded in a radical scientific theory – the Aquatic Ape Theory, which claims that humans had an aquatic stage in our evolutionary past. While coastal flooding millions of years ago turned some of our ancestors inland, is it possible that one group of our ancestors didn’t retreat from water but rather went in deeper? Could they have ventured further into sea out of necessity and to find food? The Aquatic Ape Theory makes it possible to believe that while we evolved into terrestrial humans, our aquatic relatives turned into something strangely similar to the fabled mermaid.

This is a convenient twist on the aquatic ape myth. The traditional version of the story is that early humans waded into shallow bodies of water and adopted an amphibious lifestyle. Over time, hominins became increasingly adapted to life at the water’s edge – AAH proponents claim that our apparent lack of body hair, erect posture, and other aspects of our natural history are all attributable to an aquatic past. One of the movement’s chief advocates, Elaine Morgan, even used the AAH to attack characteristic ideas about “Man the Hunter” prevalent during the 1960s and 1970s. Chasing down prey on the savannas didn’t create humanity, she argued, but instead female hominins led the way into safe little pools where infants could cling to the flowing, floating locks of their australopithecine mothers.

The Man the Hunter model of human origins was hopelessly flawed, but so was Morgan’s critique. The AAH is a classic case of picking evidence that fits a preconceived conclusion and ignoring everything else. Consider the proposal that our apparent hairlessness is an adaptation to swimming. AAH advocates point to whales and manatees as evidence that a transition to aquatic life results in hair loss. Yet we still have body hair, and the thickness of our pits varies from person to person. And there are plenty of very furry marine mammals, including seals, sea lions, otters, and polar bears. We haven’t lost our hair, and there’s no sign that hair loss is an essential aquatic adaptation. And this is to say nothing of the lack of fossil evidence for amphibious early humans, nor the fact that – outliers like Michael Phelps aside – humans are lousy swimmers compared to other aquatic mammals.

Other writers have countered AAH claims in far more detail – Jim Moore’s [Aquatic Ape website](#) presents a comprehensive critique, and Kimberly Gerson wrote [a primer on the idea’s history](#) – but suffice it to say that there is no evidence that our ancestors went through an aquatic phase. The Aquatic Ape Hypothesis is unsupported nonsense that contributes nothing to our understanding of where we came from. As anthropologist [John Hawks has pointed out](#), the Aquatic Ape Hypothesis is pseudoscience, driven by “charismatic personalities who do not answer questions” rather than evidence.

Strangely, though, *Mermaids* twists the AAH to fit the show’s story. Early humans – who look like they came straight out of 2001: A Space Odyssey – settle down along a prehistoric shoreline. But not all of them stay. Our ancestors head back to the inland forests, but the fictional mermaid ancestors remain on the beach and become fully aquatic within just a million years. (Keep in mind that the transition between completely terrestrial and fully aquatic whales took 10 million years.) *Mermaids* doesn’t use the AAH to document the origin of our species, but alters the pseudoscientific idea to bring ichthyosapiens into our world.

Using the AAH to explain the existence of mermaids would be a clever twist for a *Star Trek* episode or Syfy original movie. But this was on a self-styled educational network. Animal Planet cashed in on its poorly earned reputation as a science channel – the network previously aired [The Hot Psychic](#), after all – to make gullible viewers believe mermaids are real. Indeed, as Craig McClain noted in [his post on Mermaids](#), the disavowals didn’t pull back the curtain to say “This was fiction! Fooled you!” until the very end, and by then many viewers were not paying attention. Craig shared a few of the [shocked responses](#) to the show posted on Twitter, and I trawled for “mermaid” tweets just before posting this essay – people are still writing how fascinated they are by the illusion at the center of the show.

Speculative biology can be a lot of fun – to wonder how different forms of life might have evolved. And, with the right context and presentation, *Mermaids* could have been a unique way to highlight evolutionary and biological ideas. But rather than being a hook for communicating actual science, *Mermaids* was a sensationalistic end in itself. The show was meant to titillate and deceive – yet another bit of noxious rot in what I have often called television’s bottomless churn bucket. One tip to [Sideshow Bob](#), I’m sure Animal Planet would defend itself by saying that it issued a disclaimer, but clearly viewers either tuned out or just didn’t pay attention. When a science fiction show, dressed up as a documentary, presents the “Dramatic Re-Enactment” caveat at the bottom of some scenes, it’s not surprising that some viewers were confused about what they were actually seeing.

Not that my debunking will do much good. I don’t know how many people watched *Mermaids*, but I’m certain that many more people saw it than will ever read this post. That’s one of the most frustrating aspects of science communication. Misinformation spreads wide and fast, whether it’s coming from a fake documentary or a news report. Debunking false claims only makes a difference if people actually pay attention to the correction. And contrary to Rebecca Greenfield’s opinion at [the Atlantic Wire](#) that sensationalized misinformation might just be a regular and healthy part of the science news cycle, I’d rather do without all the bombastic grapple. While I appreciate that Rebecca singled me out as a debunker – the specific instance being [the case of earth-altering dinosaur facts](#) – my cranky takedowns usually amount to little more than damage control and are primarily read by people who are similarly annoyed with the media. It’s only when my complaints influence writers and reporters with broader platforms – like what happened during [the Kraken controversy](#) – that my efforts make much of a difference. That’s just the way it goes, and that’s why I’d much rather stop ballast splashing all over the place than only try to clean up the mess afterward.